

# Chinoiserie

## Reading Group Guide

By Molly Sutton Kiefer

- 1 | *Chinoiserie* means “the imitation or evocation of Chinese motifs and techniques in art, furniture, and architecture, especially in the 18th century.” It is from the French word *chinois* (Chinese). What does the title, which appears in the poem “Nightingale & Firebird,” suggest about the collection of poems? How does this title connect to the poem “Red Transferware”?
- 2 | The opening poem “Phoenix Nocturne” evokes the curio and catalogues objects in a stark landscape. How does this poem set the reader up for later objects throughout the collection?
- 3 | Addressing the reader in “Dear Reader” is a strategy that was often used in 19th century literature—“Reader, I married him.” What is being told to the reader in this poem? How does this invitation to the reader change the experience of reading the poem?
- 4 | “Design for a Flying Machine” begins with “Nothing but a bridge between / that other life and here.” What does the poet mean by these words? How is longing drawn in this poem? What in your own life have you longed for in this way, “the body speeding in sleep?”
- 5 | “Poppies” uses simile and metaphor to connect the vibrant beauty of a flower to a more violent world. What does this connection implicate in the poem? What does this scene look like in your mind? What other poems in the collection pair unexpected images?
- 6 | The poem “Bathing in the Burned House” begins with imagery and then shifts to explore imaginary lives. What types of men and women inhabit this poem? What emotions shimmer from them?
- 7 | Consider the woman in “Bathing in the Burned House” and the girl in “The Lover.” What is being said about voyeurism in regards to the feminine and the spaces female characters inhabit?
- 8 | The poem “Knife. Bass. Woman.” is one of sensual imagery, and at the center of the poem, the narrator admits, “I understand why a man rapes / before dawn.” What effect does this statement have on the rest of the poem? How does the final image expand the meaning?

- 9 | The poem “The Story of Adam and Eve” takes us to long-ago forms of book production, whereas “Lovers in Anime” takes us to a contemporary art form. How do these two poems contrast? What do the objects in these two poems offer one another? What would the characters within these poems have to offer one another?
- 10 | The lines “every woman has read / scandal in a red dress” in “Red Dress” set up a string of scandals. Do you have a “red dress” memory? Could you add to the armory? Where else does the color red appear in the collection? How does it speak back (or not) to this poem? How does the color shift in meaning throughout?
- 11 | What is the “queen wasp dormant in the window frame” doing in the poem “Photo of an Autoerotic?”
- 12 | The poem “Photo of an Autoerotic” is told in the second person. What effect does that have on the reader? Would the poem change if it were “I” instead, or “he” or “she”?
- 13 | “Maps We Have Produced in Technicolor,” “The Lover,” and “Norma Desmond Descending the Staircase as Salome” are born from film. How does prior knowledge of these films inform your reading of these poems? If you have not seen these films, what is it like to experience them through the written word?
- 14 | Many poems in this collection play with the use of white space on the page. “After the Bell Has Called the Women from the Fields” calls attention to the line break with its staggered form. What do the short lines do to the meaning and reading of the poem? How do the line breaks bear significance in this poem? Why two columns?
- 15 | The poem “Dark Horse” ends “I waited all my life / for the dry track, // the streetfight brutal with gold.” Who, in a larger sense, is the dark horse? What is the dry track? Can you think of moments in your own life that link back to the moments in this poem?
- 16 | What do you imagine is the situation being described in “Love Notes from the Firefly Spanish / English Visual Dictionary”? Why Spanish? Is there an undertone of something else amongst the playfulness?

- 17 | Poems such as “Plums” and “Borscht” bring us to the table. It is often said that a meal brings family together, and creates community. What is happening in the relationships between the speakers and the landscapes of these poems? How is food being used?
- 18 | Throughout the collection, we are driven across the country in titles — “Phoenix Nocturne,” “New York Song,” “Orange/Pittsburgh,” “Greentree Hotel, Pittsburgh,” “The New York Botanical Garden” — and in poems that evoke travel and landscapes such as “Design for a Flying Machine,” “Sleeping on Buses,” and “Flyover Country.” How does geography factor into the overall collection? How do the lines “the plane a red thorn / in the century’s gaslight” relate to the concept of geography and movement?
- 19 | There is no consistent speaker or figure to follow throughout the collection. What other threads does the poet present for the reader to move from one poem to the next? What is the emotional continuum?
- 20 | A great variety of women inhabit this collection. If one were tracing gender throughout the book, in what ways are women transformed? What are the attitudes toward women? Which women are celebrated? How is sexuality a factor?
- 21 | Lovers and love are recurrent themes in several poems—what is the attitude of the narrator within these poems? How are lovers treated? Do you think the speakers in these poems have had good experiences in love or not? What indications does the poet give for your conclusions?
- 22 | Sound plays a role in numerous poems, in titles such as “New York Song” or “Phoenix Nocturne” and in phrases such as “the sound a wing makes when the current breaks,” “marriage of pearl and roaring,” “not for their jazz,” “hum and hand-over-head,” “If I think of music / it’s not the snow,” “only the blue / flute singing,” “wind carries / low notes / through lavender / aisles,” “you remember the song / composed of gestures / for the mute tongue,” and others. How do these sounds reflect the emotional impact of the poem? How important is the sense of sound to a poem’s meaning? What other senses are strong within the poems in this collection?